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Kingpins and Diamonds:

Ninepin bowling survives as a cultural relic thanks to tradition
and family values in small town Texas

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Kingpins and Diamonds:

Ninepin bowling survives as a cultural relic thanks to tradition
and family values in small town Texas

by

Spencer Myers Selvidge, B.S.

Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
The University of Texas at Austin
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of the Requirements
for the Degree of

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Dedication

For my grandfather, Herbert James Myers. Thanks, PawPaw. You've inspired my whole life and on this project, too. Rest in peace.

Acknowledgements

This project would have never started or continued without Dennis Darling suggesting that I do it and urging me throughout the process. This project would have never finished without the wonderful Alexa Garcia-Ditta pushing me, helping me and editing me along the way.

Thank you to the members of the Blanco Bowling Club for instantly welcoming me into your community. You let me take photographs, video, sound, and ask lots of questions over the course of 18 months. This could never have been completed without your kindness.

I also want to thank: Donald Winslow, Eli Reed, Donna DeCesare, Sherre Paris, Ray Balheim, Nancy Schiesari, Chase Quarterman, Sean Mathis, Reshma Kirpalani, Eun Jeong Lee, Stephen Tidmore, I-Hwa Cheng, Raymond Thompson, Lizzie Chen, Carolyn Yaschur, Kelly West, Christina Burke, Tara Haelle, Jenn Hair, Linda Reno, Dawn Jones-Garcia, Katie Friel, Lauren Wolf, Danielle Villasana and all my other professors, classmates, colleagues and friends who have helped and inspired through the last three years. It means the world to me.

And Mom and Dad, thanks for always supporting me in everything that I have ever set out to do. It means the world to me.

Abstract

Kingpins and Diamonds:

Ninepin bowling survives as a cultural relic thanks to tradition
and family values in small town Texas

Spencer Myers Selvidge, MA

The University of Texas at Austin, 2012

Supervisor: Dennis Darling

Today, and for the last 20 years, the Blanco Bowling Club and Café has seen a decrease of active membership and faces real challenges to maintain relevance in an ever-evolving world of technology, activities, entertainment and economic uncertainty.

Ninepin bowling is spread over four mostly rural counties in Texas' Hill Country with 18 different alleys, including Blanco. Though Blanco's population has grown over the last 50 years, its bowling club's membership hasn't. Blanco, a town of 2,205 people is a rural outlier statistically – it has grown every 10 years since the 1950s. From 2000 to 2010, Blanco's population grew by 33.62 percent, more than double Texas' average and almost five times the national growth rate. Several factors could account for Blanco's growth, but being roughly 45 miles from both Austin and San Antonio and being located on a state highway doesn't hurt. Gourley suspects that now more than ever people are calling Blanco home while working in nearby population centers. They don't get out into the community as much.

The club, and to some extent the town itself, is and has been under a quiet assault from the modern world.

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KINGPINS and DIAMONDS:

Ninepin bowling survives as a cultural relic thanks to tradition and family values in small town Texas

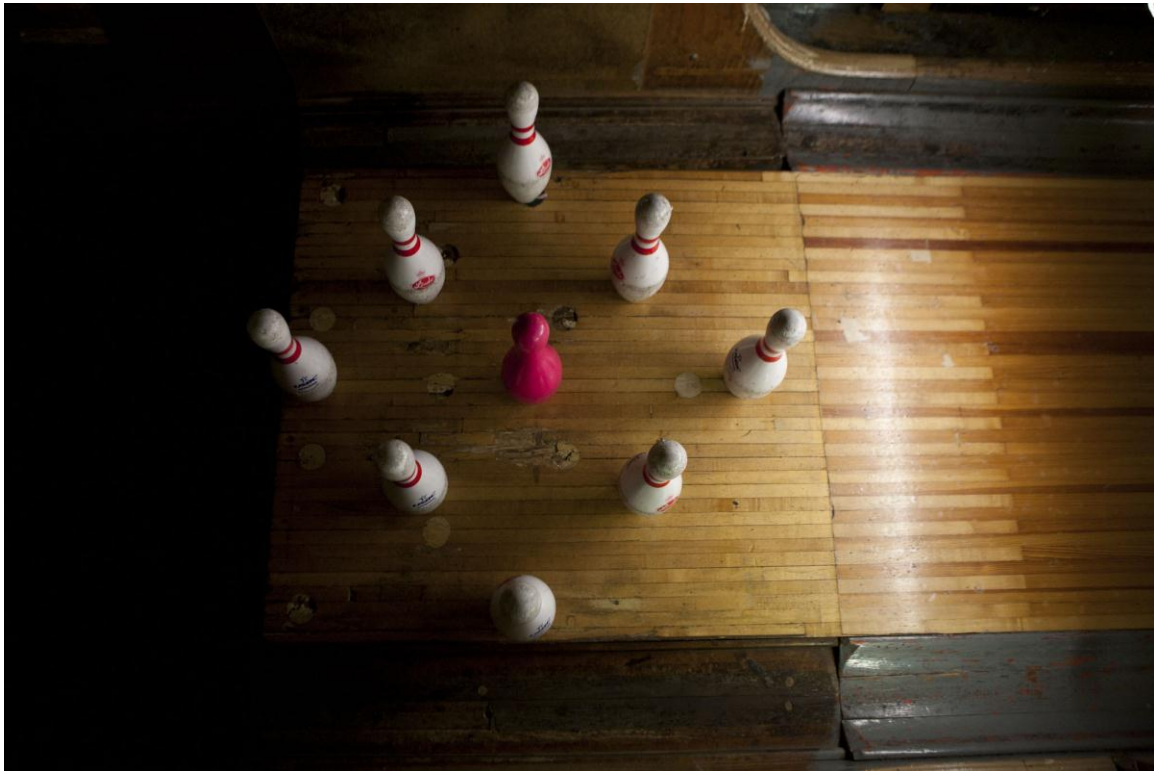


Illustration 1: Ninepin

Colton Maly, a teenager from Blanco, Texas, gets a few seconds to sit down, catch his breath and wipe his brow before the next bowler, his grandmother Barbara Maly, takes her turn. Colton leans forward and looks through the screen where he sits between lanes 5 and 6 as Barbara throws the ball toward the pins next to him. The ball crashes through all nine of the pins, and Colton jumps down from his perch, grabs the ball and rolls it back on the ball return. He begins to reset the pins quickly but accurately in the diamond-shaped pattern, a setup unique to ninepin bowling. Ninepin bowling alleys don't have machines to do Colton's work. One night a week, Colton walks past the lanes down to the back of the Blanco Bowling Club and Cafe to set pins for three hours, usually for a team of his family members and their opponents, earning about \$45 per night.



Illustration 2: Colton Maly #1

The club is a local watering hole and Blanco family tradition, where multigenerational families spend weeknights gossiping, catching up and playing ninepin while enjoying a few beers and sometimes dinner. However, Blanco teenagers like Colton don't always want to sit at the end of bowling lanes to set pins for their parents and grandparents when there are more interesting things to do. With the local youth becoming less and less interested in ninepin as the years progress, the older generations begin muse about better days.

“That’s just it, there is no tradition anymore,” said Tom Gourley, a former Blanco Mayor and lifelong member of the Blanco Bowling Club and Café.

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Illustration 3: Blanco

“I’m afraid [ninepin] can’t be here much longer, the economy's hurt, ya know. There’s a lot a lot of lost money going on right now, and its no one's fault. It’s not the way it’s managed or anything; it’s just a bad time. And no new blood... you gotta have new blood

to keep going,” said Gourley. The club, and to some extent the town itself, is and has been under a quiet assault from the modern world.

“People have lost interest in the ninepin game, very few kids come up. There's too many other sports, ya know, too many other activities, school activities. When I went to school it was football or basketball. That was about it. Now there's so many things that [kids] get so involved in, and I understand they're involved, they don't come here and bowl.”

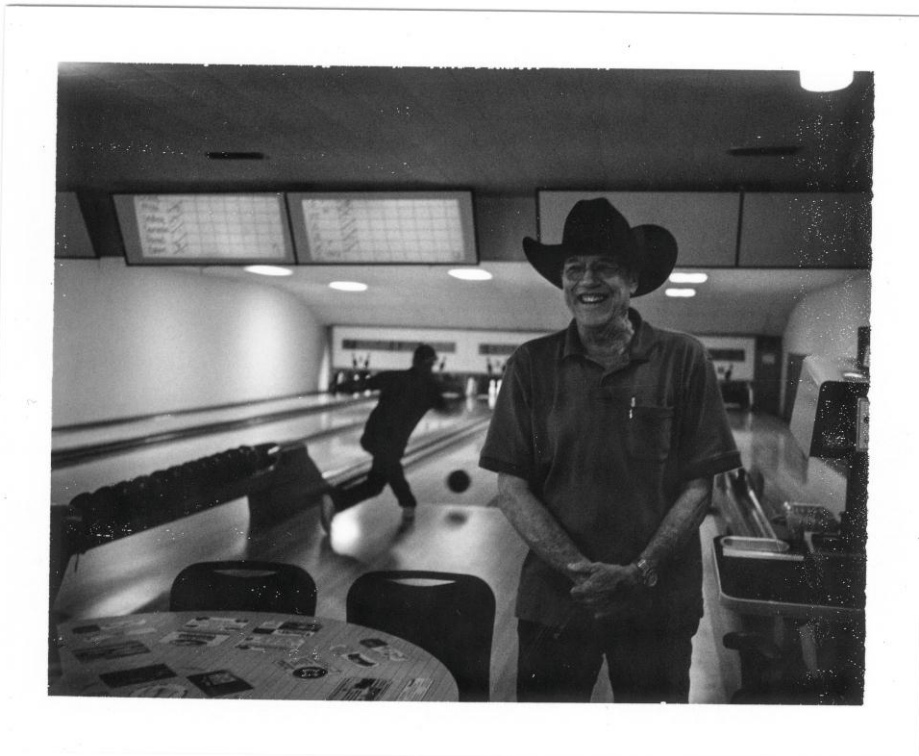


Illustration 4: Tom Gourley

Much of Blanco's historical identity centers on two things: agriculture and ninepin bowling. But as population centers from the south and east grow closer, Blanco's small town values and traditions, and relative geographic isolation, grow more challenged. Texas' version of ninepin bowling, a game brought to the Hill Country by German immigrants during the 19th century, seems to be surviving for a variety of reasons. Blanco residents, like most in small towns, resist too much change happening too fast and love their traditions, like ninepin. On the other hand, the town remains stable due to the economic growth brought by its growing population, but the new residents from Austin

or San Antonio, or any other bigger city, don't always appreciate the old ways.

* * *

Blanco's late 19th century county courthouse, like many in rural Texas, sits front and center in the town's square. Blanco's architecturally diverse building styles – country rustic, traditional limestone, corrugated metal – don't belie a cohesive vision for the town that's never stopped growing, however slowly or quickly, in decades. And at any point in time, a few of the businesses here will be shuttered. Growth and economic stability don't necessarily mean the businesses in the town's core are always economically vigorous.

Across the street from the courthouse, on the northeast corner of the square, sits another decidedly less noticeable limestone building, the Bowling Club and Café, with a wooden entry way attached to the front, doors facing east and west. It is bland by comparison to the courthouse and other nearby buildings but has a robust crowd of cars and trucks parked outside breakfast, lunch and dinner. Local ranchers, business owners, housewives and retirees flock here. Its rough, naturally hued walls made from local limestone glow as the sun rises and sets each day. Though the courthouse was the historical and visual focal point of Blanco's early days, the Bowling Club is the real center of gravity in Blanco today.



Illustration 5: Blanco Bowling Club and Cafe

It is the Bowling Club and Café where tourists have come to have their interests piqued and where locals have gathered, since 1948, to have their bellies filled with 1950s and 60s diner food. The pot roast is delicious and the affordable home-cooked breakfasts hit the spot.

The small windows on the otherwise plain limestone façade have floral printed curtains one might find in his grandmother's kitchen, and the local high school symbol, a panther paw, is painted on the walkway leading up to the doors. The entryway's corkboard is filled with signs for 4H and FFA, lost dogs, advertisements for oak firewood and brush clearing, and community events like a classic car show and a Blanco River volunteer cleanup day. The Blanco County News newspapers sit idly in a rack, some of them tattered after having been read and replaced for the next person to read.

Entering through the café's second doorway, the hum of small-town gossip and clanking silverware and cups fills the café. The wood-paneled room is almost full for every meal of the day. The tables look new, but the café stools with vinyl seats at the counter facing

the kitchen show the true age of the establishment. One might half-expect to see a western version of Jimmy Stewart or Donna Reed drinking a vanilla single-malt at that very counter. The pies in the plexi-glass case in the corner have meringues so high they look more like the crowns of the cowboy hats many of the men in the café are wearing. But as the name implies, it is more than a café on a small town square. Look through the pass-through cut out in the wall that leads to the conjoined bar in the back and see some peculiar features.



Illustration 6: Café



Illustration 7: Pass-Through

There is a bowling alley back there – six lanes for German-derived ninepin bowling. Aesthetically, ninepin appears much like the tenpin bowling most Americans are used to, but is a far different game in terms of gameplay. Though tenpin was quickly becoming the most popular form of bowling throughout most of the United States in the early 19th century, and even to some degree in rural central Texas, ninepin thrived deep in the German immigrant enclaves of the Texas Hill Country.

What truly sets ninepin apart from the more modern tenpin, beyond the rules and scoring, are the pinsetters. Gourley has seen tourists come in to the café and look in the back while bowling is going on and say ‘oh my god, there’s boys down there,’ he said. A game that historically and contemporarily relies on human beings to set the pins is a relic compared modern-day expectations and standards, even in the 1950s and 1960s.

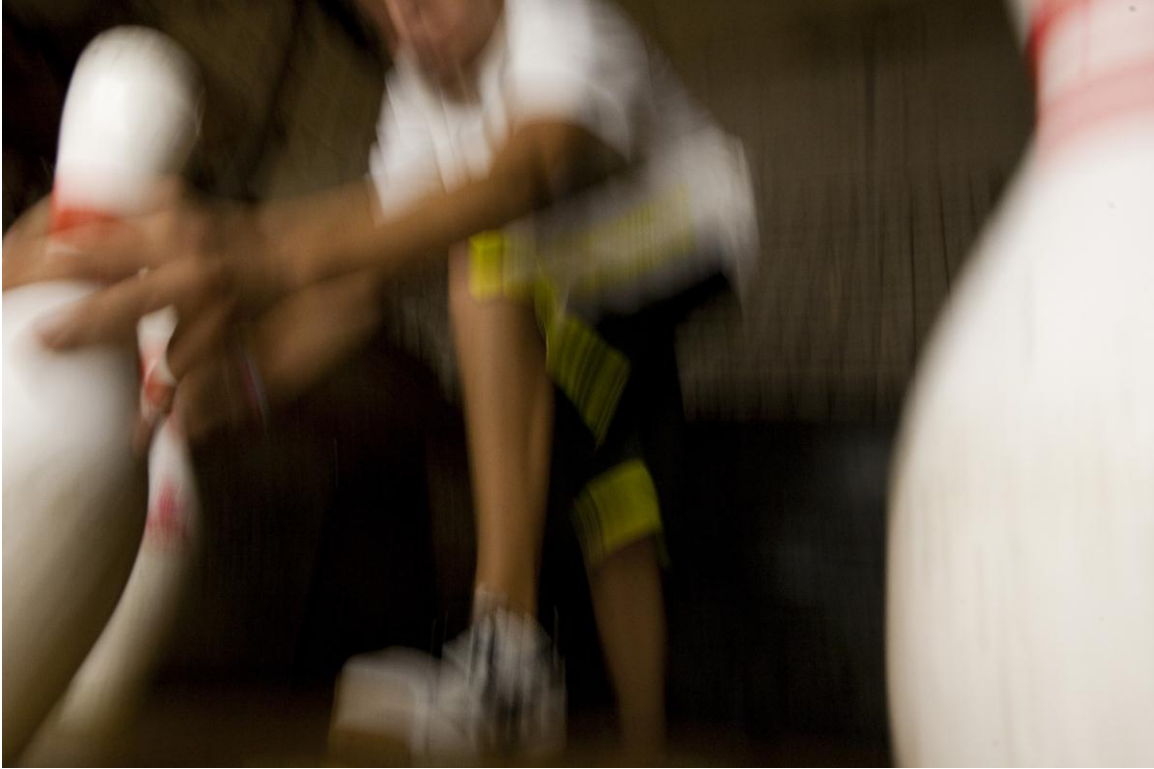


Illustration 8: Pinsetting #1

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The ninepin game now played in Texas was once similar to its other ninepin cousins all over the world. From colonial times right through the mid 19th century, ninepin was the most popular form of bowling in the United States. *Rip Van Winkle*, a popular, fanciful short story written in 1819 by Washington Irvine, uses antiquated and ghostly Dutchmen playing ninepins in his story about a man who falls asleep in the Catskill Mountains for 20 years.

Now, though, ninepin can only be found in Texas' Hill Country, being played primarily by the descendants of German immigrants. They now play with the rules of friendly, non-competitive matches found elsewhere in the world – the old German style. First introduced to Texas during folk festivals, the traditions of today are a reflection of ninepin's past in Texas as a game played during social events.



Illustration 9: The Alley

In 1837 Texas, ninepin alleys were so popular that the Republic of Texas began taxing them annually for \$150. Throughout the rest of the United States, nine and tenpin bowling were often associated with men gambling or skipping out on the job, so it was outlawed in much of the country. In Texas, however, the game was always a family affair, which helped it survive to the present day. After the turn of the century, around World War I, most of Texas had switched to tenpin. By the 1950s, machines to help set tenpin caused most commercial and club ninepin alleys to switch to the increasingly popular tenpin game, except in traditionally German communities. The German communities, known for holding onto tradition stubbornly, preferred the teamwork and social outlet that ninepin provided. Outside of church, the local ninepin alley was the only place to socialize with neighbors and friends.

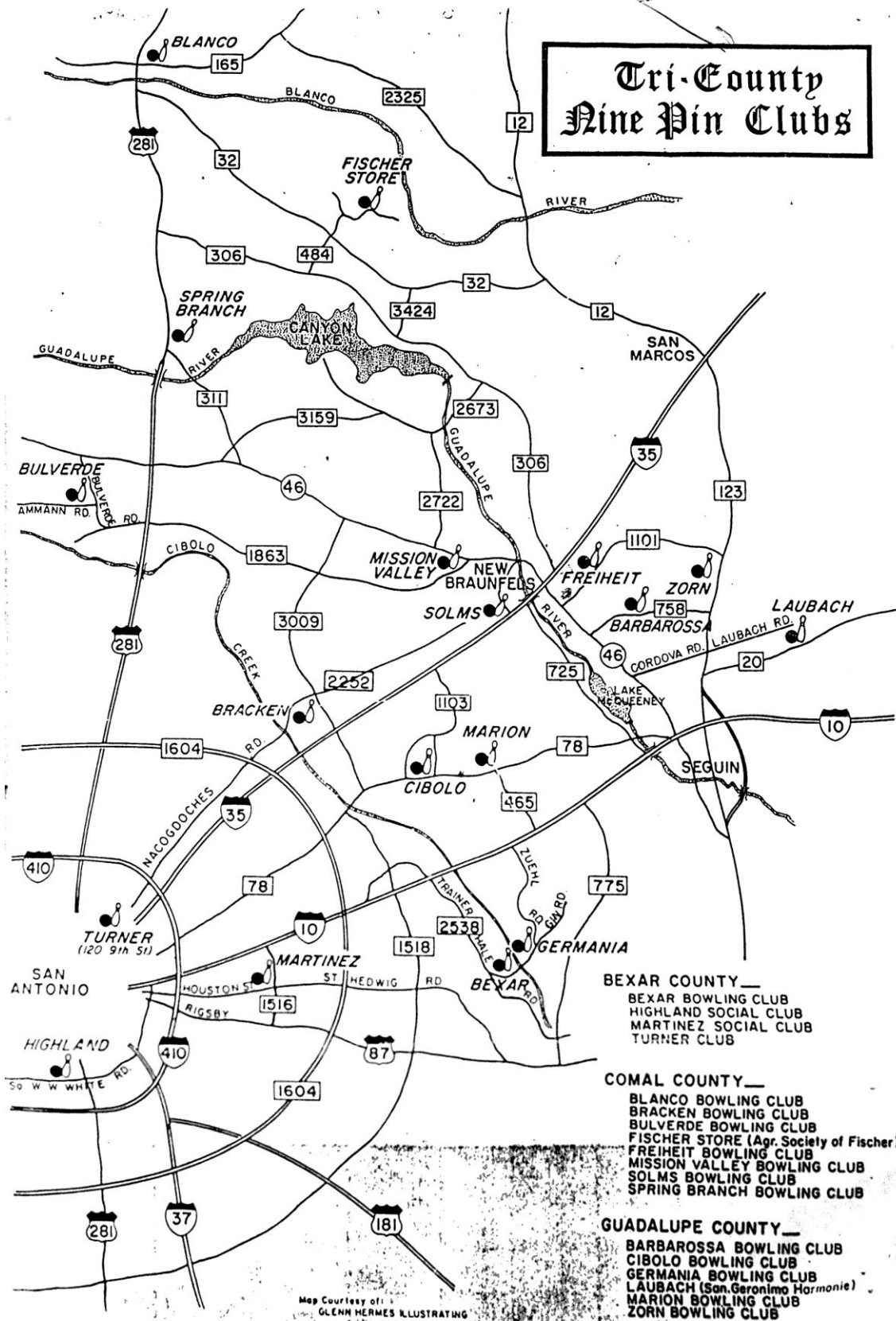


Illustration 10: Ninepin Clubs

Today, bowlers roll bowling balls down standard tenpin-style lanes toward a set of nine pins in a diamond configuration. Viewed from any side, the pin structure is 1-2-3-2-1. The center pin, number 5, is also known as the “kingpin” and is usually pink or red with the traditional white pins around it. As the bowlers take their turns, they attempt to leave the kingpin standing alone, which results in a score of 12 points. If the kingpin is knocked down, the bowlers continue bowling at the rest of the pins. The resulting score in this case, is a score of nine points.



Illustration 11: Watching

The rules of Texas ninepin are easy when compared to the current forms of European ninepin. Each team has six bowlers and six frames to get the largest score possible against the opposing team. Each bowler gets two rolls per turn, in stark contrast to tenpin, which requires 10 individual frames per person and starts with a full set of pins each frame. In ninepin, each frame can be seen as more of an inning, where each bowler has his or her chance to add to the teams score, adding upon the pins knocked down by the previous bowler from the team.

This means the team gets 12 rolls per frame with a total of 72 rolls during the game. Each frame starts with a “full house” – that is, the nine pins in a diamond pattern with the kingpin in the middle. Scoring happens four ways: 9 points for clearing all pins, 12 points for leaving the kingpin, points for however many pins are down on the last throw of each frame, or 9/12 points for throwing a ringer. A “9 ringer” is thrown at a full rack, taking down all the pins simultaneously, and a “12 ringer” is when a strike is thrown while leaving the kingpin standing. When no points are scored on a throw, a checkmark is placed on the scoreboard to keep track of turns.



Illustration 12: Bowling

The team bowls at those nine pins until they knock them all down or leave only the kingpin standing, so it is possible to have all 6 bowlers play on one “full house.”

A hypothetical first frame begins with a captain, like Grip Weber, choosing any bowler from the team. Weber always selects Dorothy Troppy, his sister-in-law, to lead off his team. Dorothy, who is nearly 80 years old, walks up to the line and throws her ball. Sometimes she hits on one or both throws, sometimes she doesn't. But Grip and the team

are undeterred; however many pins she knocks down is just less pins for the next bowler in the frame, his wife Evelyn Weber, to knock down. If Evelyn knocks down the rest of the pins on her first throw, scoring the team nine points, she then gets to bowl again at a full rack – nine pins. Perhaps Evelyn misses completely on her next throw and Grip calls up Gourley, who the captain knows is a strong bowler. Gourley lines up and gives his first throw, taking down six or seven pins, but not the kingpin. This gives Gourley a chance at 12 points, so he lines up and knocks down all the remaining pins, except the kingpin, getting his team another 12 points in the first frame.

Grip would smile, and everyone – including the other team – would holler and high-five the accomplishment. In fact, after every score and oftentimes after close misses, teams high-five and congratulate one another.

At that point in the frame, they would have scored 21 points. Two more bowlers would each take their turns, the second one clearing the rack to score another nine points, giving them 30 points. Grip, with only himself left as the sixth person to take a turn this frame, gets to bowl at a full rack. He steps up to the line, makes his approach and lets the ball go. Grip doesn't like what he sees: it's an odd angle heading toward the headpin. Much to Grip's and his team's surprise, the ball strikes the headpin and takes down every pin but kingpin, scoring what they call a "12-ringer."



Illustration 13: Cheering

The entire alley erupts into cheers for Grip's score, since 12-ringers are more luck than anything else. Grip walks back to the ball return and still has one more throw. Again, he throws the ball and this time only catches a corner pin. Since it is the end of the frame, that one pin counts as a point. For the first frame, Grip's team scored a total of 43 points. The rack is now reset to start the process all over again for five more frames.

Gourley said the real strategy to ninepin is making sure the captain of the team knows his or her bowlers. "Where you want to put them up and when... some people hit both sides pretty equal, there are a lot of splits. These things are so wide apart it's easy to get only 3 pins. So a really good game is 225. Most people, though, bowl 190-210, in that area," Gourley said. Laughing, he adds, "Sometimes we bowl 140, you know, in that area."

The family teams of today weren't always so familial back in the busier years. Unless they were coming in from out of town, people used to sign up to bowl in a series and come together a group. "Back then, everyone signed up individually or as a couple,

captains were chosen and then teams were picked,” much like school children pick teams for kickball, said Weber.

Gourley explains, “Now though, in order to get people to bowl they enter a whole team because they want to bowl with people they enjoy bowling with. There's no prize fund. The only recognition you get is that 4 teams bowl in a roll off and whoever wins the series, there is a little plaque back there with your name on it. Yea, it's about pride and fun! Ya know? People come down, drink a few beers, laugh, ya know, make fun of each other,” Gourley laughs some more.



Illustration 14: Team

Ninepin was not always an indoor game. Originally played outside with small, hand-sized wooden balls and wooden pins, the game was eventually brought inside like other bowling games around the world. Small hole-less wooden balls eventually gave way to small rubber balls with two finger holes in them.

John Dechert remembers those days. “I can remember at my granddad’s place there was a little store, a little country store, and they had one lane, pretty crude little barn with one lane, and they had wooden balls with two holes. And my granddad had a bunch of them wooden balls and we got them when he sold his place and just didn’t have enough sense to put ‘em away and keep ‘em. We rolled them around and played with them as kids and whatnot and they went here or there and washed in the river and everything else,” he said.

By the 1950s, the rubber balls transitioned to modern American tenpin-style equipment and lanes. It became too hard for the Texas ninepin players to source the traditional equipment so they had to adapt using the modern, predominant style of bowling equipment in America.

* * *

Local masons and carpenters started building the Blanco Bowling Club and Cafe in 1947. It opened in May, 1948, and was named “Bowling Alley” at the time. The bowling alley with a cafe was the brainchild of local businessman and grocer, Rolland Bindseil. Dechert remembers Bindseil “had the grocery store across the street and he just thought it was an opportunity, a café and a bowling alley, which is very unique now. Of all the other bowling alleys, this is the only one that is run as a business due to the cafe. Now some of them have little food bars where they serve hamburgers, chips [to the members], but this is the only one that is a café and the whole business is run by the club.” The outer four lanes were for ninepin and the middle two lanes were for tenpin, “So you could come in and do both,” Dechert said, or “you could come in and do tenpin on all six lanes” on nights when ninepins leagues weren’t playing. At that time, Bowling Alley had hand-powered hydraulic tenpin setting machines on all six lanes.



Illustration 15: Shoes and Beer

The bowling business was privately run from 1948 to 1967 as both a ninepin alley and tenpin alley, but in 1962, Bindseil decided to get out. He had been renting the alley to Freddy Weeks and later to Dechert's parents during the late 50s through the 1962. The alley made its way into the hands of C.A. Weeks, who only held onto for a few years before a new opportunity presented itself. In 1967, the last big change the alley has seen over its 65-year history occurred. Weeks had wanted out of the business because "he was a truck driver, hauled hay... He thought he could get this and it'd be easy but that wasn't the case," said Dechert. So, Weeks was looking to sell. At the same time, shortly before 1967, a small 4-lane bowling club at Twin Sisters, halfway between Blanco, Texas, and Spring Branch, Texas, burned to the ground and the club there split. Half the members saw the Blanco Alley, which was for sale again, as an opportunity to start their own club. So in May 1967, the club took over the alley and renamed it the Blanco Bowling Club and Café.



Illustration 16: Original Lockers

Gourley said that when the bowling center opened in 1948, his dad eagerly signed up for the first series and bowled his entire life. “He passed away in [1972] and in that time he never missed a series. He bowled from the time he signed up to the day he passed away. He and one other guy were the only people who ever did that. He started me bowling, but first he started my two older sisters bowling and then I started bowling with him and my mom never did bowl [in the early years].”

When the newly formed club bought the alley and restaurant in 1967, they had a 38-year mortgage for \$1000 a year, plus a little interest. Dechert laughs, saying, “Now the AC units cost more than that.”

From 1967 through the late 1980s, the club thrived, changing very little visually and even less demographically. The changes were so few over time that most people have a hard time remembering what is different now. The biggest change, most people note, is the new, synthetic lanes installed in 2011, replacing the wood lanes that had been there for decades, and the flat screen TV in the corner.



Illustration 17: Overhead

Older players, like Grip and Evelyn Weber, remember the days before the overhead projectors used for scoring were installed. There were chalkboards on the two sides of the alley where the captains stood and kept score, with cup holders for their drinks. There were stadium-style bleachers for onlookers to watch the bowling and team benches behind each lane. What the Webers remember most, though, is that bowling took place all the time in the 1950s.

Grip said, “Of course [now] you have things like televisions, but I can still remember when on a Saturday or Sunday evening, it was maybe not quite a weekly affair, but people would pick their own teams and they had match games... match a bunch of players and have a lot of fun on Saturday nights [in] open bowling, not leagues... Not because of the cafe but they were here for the bowling. There was so many people back there you couldn't get in sometimes.”



Illustration 18: Grip Weber

From 1967 to today, the Blanco Bowling Club and Café has been member-owned and run. In the past, efforts to separate the café business from the alley were largely unsuccessful. Today, the café is the major financial supporter of the bowling club portion of the building and overall business. This is a unique position for a club in the Texas Tri-County Ninepin Bowling Association. “Other ninepin alleys aren't as ingrained in the community,” Evelyn Weber said. “[They] aren't in a town, they are out in the country.” Grip continued, “They are all clubs but outsiders don't come to them like they do this one, because of the cafe. Some of the other lanes, if they serve any food, it's only on bowling nights and only to the club's members, the only people there.”

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Like his father, Gourley has spent his adult life in the bowling alley. In fact, the now 71-year-old former Blanco mayor is a self-proclaimed bowling fanatic. “Ninepin, tenpin makes no difference, I appreciate the game. This one... my dad grew up with this one, and he was my idol bowling. That's the reason I'm so into this bowling game. He was the first guy to get into the ninepin hall of fame [in Blanco], so I was hoping to hang around long enough to join him,” Gourley said. “It'd be the first father-son deal. That'd be cool, but that's kind of like football, baseball players...it's nothing you ever count on.”

In the early 1950s, Gourley's first taste of bowling was setting pins for his family, much like Colton Maly's. His family lived on a ranch south of Blanco near Spring Branch, Texas, where his father Buck Gourley was the ranch's foreman. Back in 1948, when the Blanco bowling alley first opened, long before it was a club, Buck Gourley “started bowling that day and when he died in April of '72 he had never missed a series.” Buck was the first in Tom's family to bowl ninepin that he is aware of. His grandparents all died young when Tom was too young to remember.

They drove to Blanco once a week so Buck, his mother Lillie and his oldest sister Dorothy could bowl ninepin. The road back then was just two paved, crooked lanes, said Gourley. He remembers that there would be eight or nine other carloads of people there at the alley bowling on those nights in the 1950s.

Gourley loves to mention that he “made a dollar and a nickel per night, 35 cents per game.” Once his brother, Norm, was old enough, they set pins together. “We'd both set and then we'd go next door. It used to be an Exxon station that stayed open late. We'd go over there and buy .22 shells so we could hunt all the next week until we come back the next [time] to set pins and buy some more shells,” he said with a big grin.



Illustration 19: Pinsetting #2

Sitting in the back of the alley setting pins in the early 1950s was more of a challenge than it is today. There was one pinsetter per lane, and there was machinery to deal with. Back then, four of the six lanes had hand-loaded tenpin machines hanging on racks from the ceiling. “They were spring loaded. There was no hydraulics, there was nothing – it was all muscles,” said Gourley. They had to crawl under the springs to clear pins and reset them for ninepin. “Some of those old racks, the springs were getting weak and they were sagging down you could barely get under ‘em sometimes. ... There was enough room to set ‘em but you had to duck pretty good to get in to the front pins,” Gourley said.

The pinsetters had a bench along the back of the pit where they could watch from, and sometimes stand on, to escape the flying pins from the more powerful bowlers. “Where the ball [lands], that’s where we had to sit. We sat behind the pins and now they sit in front of them. We got to know the bowlers, which ones threw the ball hard and we’d climb up [the fence] and get above the rack,” said Gourley. The trick was learning more than who threw the ball hard. Gourley said if one learned the game and paid close attention to what pins were still standing, one could learn where they would go or guess how to better dodge them. Gourley continued, “They’d come flying. I saw a couple kids get hit. I never did get hit.”

But with his dad bowling, Gourley had to pay close attention to more than just powerful bowlers and never appear to be goofing around. “It was okay to drink beer while you bowled, but you didn’t eat supper, you didn’t wander around and visit. When it was your turn to bowl you better be watching or he’d get on your case. That’s how serious he took it. Setting pins for him was the same way.” He was, after all, setting pins for his family, and they wanted to win – and win they did.

“I couldn’t wait. Back then, they wouldn’t let school kids bowl. For one thing they had plenty of bowlers back then.” Gourley said. “Now they bowl from the time they’re... I have a great nephew that’s probably 14 or 15 that’s bowling in the league.”

After their night’s work was over, “while the adults finished there beer or ate a hamburger or whatever they would want to do then,” all of the pin boys would start setting up pins for each other and they’d all bowl. “That’s where we learned how to bowl.”

Once he was old enough, Gourley’s father started teaching him to bowl after a night of setting pins. “Most of ‘em, like my dad, [were] very interested in getting us interested in bowling anyway. It’d give him an excuse to have one more Lone Star before we went home,” Gourley said. In those days, there were no junior leagues. A young bowler just had to practice after pin setting, during open bowling, or in match games, but the

competition was so stiff that they wouldn't be on a team till they were deemed good enough.



Illustration 20: Growing Up

Gourley grew up watching his parents and older sisters succeed at the game. He said they inspired him to play at a high level, too. His dad was a strong role model, but it was his sisters Dorothy and Hazel that made the real waves. “When Dorothy was bowling in her prime, she was unbeatable by any woman in Blanco, period. Dorothy was as good as there ever was for women bowlers. She and Hazel, both my sisters, they were both really extra special,” Gourley said.

At age 19, like many of Blanco’s youth today, Gourley left Blanco for Austin, where he started bowling tenpin. There, Gourley learned another style of bowling that helped him bowl ninepin better. He and his sister Evelyn would come to Blanco to bowl and “had people sitting back wishing we didn’t show up.”

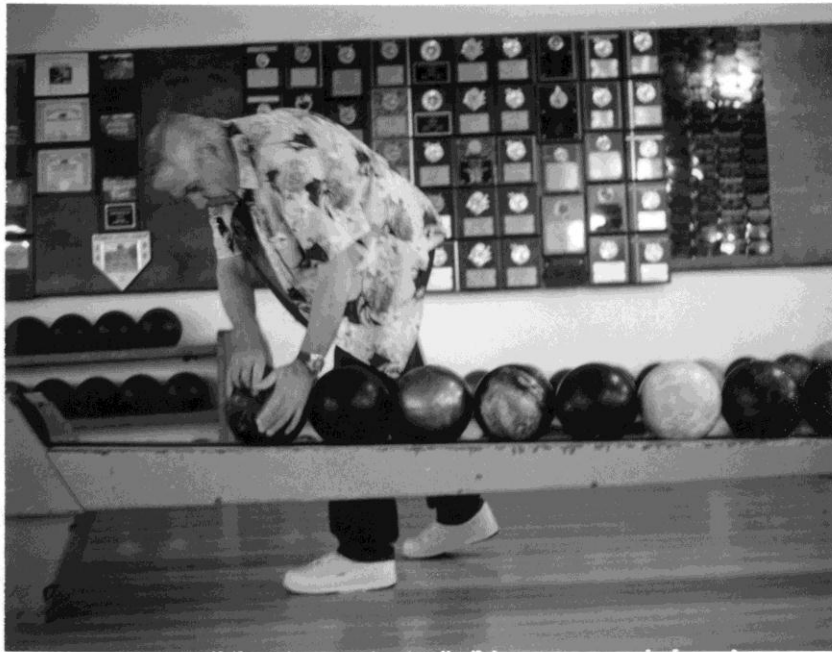


Illustration 21: Competition

Gourley looks back fondly on the days he got to bowl with his father and sisters. “He definitely was all for it. He bowled tournaments. We used to have what they call prize bowling. We’d put one in Blanco once a year and all the clubs would send teams, men women and mixed, and we went to all of theirs. So we traveled quite a bit on Saturdays and bowled. Me and my mom, Hazel and Joe and Daddy, we’d find another guy or two and who ever could go would go,” Gourley said.

Other times, Gourley said they would have fun and invited outsiders to the alley. “We’d challenge the San Antonio tenpin bowlers and bring them up here and bowl ninepin and we’d just kill ‘em, ya know!” Gourley said with a big laugh, “I mean, then we’d go down there and they would just kill us.”

His favorite memory, though, was winning the Tri-County Ninepin tournament in 1968, a first for Blanco, on a team with Blanco Hall of Famers that included his father, Buck, and current club president, John L. Dechert. The tournament was in Blanco that year, which

made the win extra special. Gourley quips that being a championship bowler could have helped his political career, saying, “I should have used that... I bowl ninepin, vote for me!” But he concedes the win probably didn’t even make it into the local paper back then.



Illustration 22: Preparation

In those days, Gourley was as competitive as they come. He was highly ranked as a tenpin bowler in the state of Texas and never really stopped playing ninepin, playing in tournaments and prize games, even gambling, all around the state. “Especially when I was younger, every shot counted and every one was for blood. Now I have fun,” he said.

Gourley had lived outside of Blanco since 1959, but bowled ninepin there as often as possible until 1983, when muscular dystrophy kept him from bowling – all bowling – for 14 years. Gourley moved back to Blanco from Austin in the early 1990s, when he “retired,” to run and transport cattle and raise his chickens. In 1997, he started bowling ninepin again, “because it is a much slower game than tenpin.” A few years later,

Gourley was healthy enough to go back to bowling tenpin, too, though he admits he can't be as competitive as he'd like in either variant these days.

"It is a family tradition. That the main reason we keep carrying it on and trying to keep it built up. We'd love for our kids to be here following us," Gourley said in 2010. "I guess that's the real reason for it, we were a close knit family."



Illustration 23: Competition

Today, Gourley lives in Stephenville, Texas, on a small ranch where he recently retired to for a second time. He still bowls tenpin but has had to stop playing ninepin, "From my house to the bowling alley [in Blanco] it's three hours," he said. It just isn't feasible to drive all that way when "diesel is up near \$4 per gallon."

But that doesn't diminish the family legacy to Tom. "Some of my nieces and nephews are bowling now, they all started with my dad and my mom," he said. "My mom bowled for years and years, all my sisters had bowled at some time, and [a] brother is the only one that never threw a ball, everyone else has done it."

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Some people, like couples Lynn and Shelli Maly and Marilyn and Harvey Rust, think ninepin struggles because of the need for pinsetters. They sometimes have a hard time finding them and when they do, Marilyn said the kids don't want to work hard, "they don't want to sweat" anymore; they don't play, nor do they want to, and even though it's easy money, pinsetters are hard to get.

Pinsetters have always been paid in Blanco, though. Harvey Rust and Tom Gourley got \$0.96 a night and \$1.05 per night respectively in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Later, Lynn Maly made \$0.70 per game in the early 1970s, cashing him in at \$2.10 per night. Today, his son, Colton, who is now 15 has been setting pins for almost 3 years, gets \$7 a game plus tips, earning him \$40, \$50 or sometimes more per night.



Illustration 24: Pinsetting #3

"When they get through with their tips, it's a lot of spending money for a high school or middle school kid – better than my dollar five," Gourley said.

Harvey, Lynn, Tom and many others had their first jobs setting pins, earning spending money. If they were lucky, they got a soda pop and a bag of chips during a break. Today, Colton said he enjoys setting pins, especially for his parent's team, because it's "good money." It helps that Mom ends up tipping pretty well, too. Colton has grown up with his parents playing ninepin, and it has been a part of his life for as long as he remembers. He has little interest in playing though – most of his time is taken up by baseball and track – much to his parents' chagrin. Though they also understand there is much more to do these days. Colton doesn't think he will bowl anytime soon. He wants to leave Blanco at his first opportunity. But the thought of ninepin in Blanco eventually going away brings about a stark moment of gravity to the 15 year old's tone: "I want my kids to be able to play," he said. He elaborates that he'll come back someday and that he'd like to have the chance to play or for his children to have the option. And Harvey and Marilyn, across the table, bring up that maybe that's how Blanco has changed: no one stays in the community their entire lives anymore. Young people move out to get more education, to start careers and families.

Another pinsetter, Addison Denslow, a 15 year old high school sophomore, has been setting pins for three years. He said it "pays well, keeps me out of trouble... ya!" And at about \$45 a night, he thinks he'll keep setting "till I graduate... till I'm 17." Addison, though, isn't from Blanco. His Dad drives him the 25-30 minutes from Wimberley, Texas, to set pins once a week. He got the job because his brother, Alek, now 17, started when he was 12, too. Addison, for his part, is good at the job but has no interest in playing. Only one of Addison's friends knows what ninepin is and he doesn't know anyone who plays. "I actually don't really understand the rules or scoring. I just know my job. I leave the rest to them," he matter-of-factly said. He's tried a few frames for fun but said, "It's just not there for me... I'm a baseball player ever since I was 6. I love hunting, I love fishing."



Illustration 25: Addison Denslow

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The problems ninepin faces run the gamut. People have less time, either actual or perceived, to give to social and competitive events outside the home. There are plenty of other leisure and extracurricular activities for both adults and the youth. Some people are work out of town and use Blanco as “a bedroom community,” a place to live and raise your kids while you spend your time working in the nearby cities. There is a seemingly general disinterest by rural youth in the old ways and the older generations who still bowl are slowly dying off.

Over the last 30 to 40 years, society at large has shifted from “community” towards more individual priorities, with technology aiding this readily, and there have been population shifts away from rural communities. Evann Ramsey, a 30-year-old mother who works in San Antonio but lives and bowls in Blanco said, “As technology evolves it takes more of our time... you're checking' email, everything's connected to the Internet. Here nothing is

connected to the Internet, [but] at home you could sit on Facebook or Pinterest for hours, you could do for as long as you'd be here bowling.” Ramsey, who moved with her parents to Blanco around 1990, grew up playing ninepin in Bracken, Texas. She started bowling at the age of 7 in the junior league there. Today, she likes “to come here because my friends are here, we get away from technology and the rush of everyday life... this town is completely different. When I come out here, it takes forever to get everything done, the people are in a slower pace, they're not in a hurry.”



Illustration 26: Technology

Further compounding the issue is ninepin’s relative isolation, and though isolation and technology are issues that could be seen as a hindrance to the survivability of ninepin, they might also be ninepin’s greatest ally for the future. “[Ninepin is] actually the first type of bowling that I knew anything about. I did very little bowling in high school; I had only set pins. I didn't even know tenpin existed until a few years after I moved to Houston in 1954,” Grip Weber said.

The Blanco Bowling Club and Café is a local institution. Almost every morning at 6am a handful of locals play dominoes, known colloquially in Texas as “bones.” And nearly every afternoon men like Gary Wood, Ben Fuchs, Doug Wagner – a carpenter who helped build the alley – and others sit at the big round table near the lanes and have a few beers talking about days past and present. Troppy, a famed Blanco ninepin bowler and Gourley’s older sister, snickers about the men at the Bowling Club, “they gossip more than the women!”



Illustration 27: The Regulars

The current series, with 18 teams, is the most team to play at once in recent memory. The club hovers around 12-15 teams over the past few years and peaked in the 1970s with 26 teams. Today, two of the 18 teams are young – in their late 20s and early 30s. This gives Gourley and Dechert hope for the sustainability of ninepin, at least in Blanco.

Now though, there’s a striking new contrast popping up in Blanco. Unlike the national trend in rural communities, many people are moving back to Blanco as they settle into their adult lives. Because of Blanco’s proximity to major cities, it isn’t too isolated,

giving families a quieter place to raise their children, and this reality provides ninepin in Blanco perhaps its best chance, over the long term, to maintain membership.

This year's members' meeting and club president election is on the horizon, slated for May 6, 2012. The restaurant's night manager, Sandy Penshorn, is thinking about running for president against John L. Dechert. Most people, including Dechert, think it could be good for the alley to have some fresh blood. However, Dechert also doesn't want to give it up after having been at the helm for over 20 years. Being president means you have to help run the everyday business of the café, not just help run the bowling league. "People rarely run for it because they don't have time for it," he said.



Illustration 28: John L. Dechert

Ninepin bowling faces challenges, some it's been facing for decades and others that have recently making stronger inroads, but ninepin also has a few aces up its sleeve. Family, tradition and social bonds have and always will be the glue that holds the sport and the clubs together. Ramsey and Gourley both think a junior league in Blanco could help stem the tide.

Gourley readily admits it's hard for kids to back up, historically speaking, to ninepin when one can drive 30 miles to bowl tenpin with everything being automatic. He said it's easy because everything a bowler needs, he or she can rent, "where here you have to own it because there's... well there's half a dozen shoes [to borrow] back there." Gourley went on, "The hard part is you can't just walk in and turn on a lane like you do with tenpin. You have to arrange to have pin boys here, someone to take care of you. [And] the bowling alley is not open except for night bowling, so Saturday morning they'd have to open up and oil the lanes, which they should be more willing to do to get more members."

Ramsey, too, thinks junior bowling and community involvement is the best bet for the future. She coaches cheerleading, but she said she'd rather coach bowling. Ramsey said, "You gotta be involved and get people involved for things to keep continuing." She refuses to bowl tenpin. "It's not fun, it's not interesting, I hate it," she said. Ramsey wants to come to the club instead and take part in her community. She feels that if her great grandparents used to bowl there, and a lot of her neighbors and friends bowl there, and many people she knows used to set pins in Blanco, that she should do her part here, too. "You're all working together to bowl in a competition, out there your friend's kid is down there setting pins you're going to tip your friend's kid for setting pins – it's a machine," she said.



Illustration 29: Junior Bowling, Spring Branch, Texas



Illustration 30: New Blanco Junior Bowler

Ramsey went on, “I used to set pins, and my kids will set pins once they old enough to set pins. My whole family is from around here: New Braunfels, Bracken, Blanco.”

In 2010, Gourley struck a pessimistic tone, unsure if the Blanco club could survive. “In fifteen years this place could be an antique store,” he said. In 2012 however, he is more optimistic, saying “I’m a little more excited about the chances of it hanging on since it did during this last recession, it stopped a lot of people that used to bowl - the cost, the drive here and back.” He still worries about its future but notes that recessions tend to drive down participation and the current economic slump is waning somewhat.

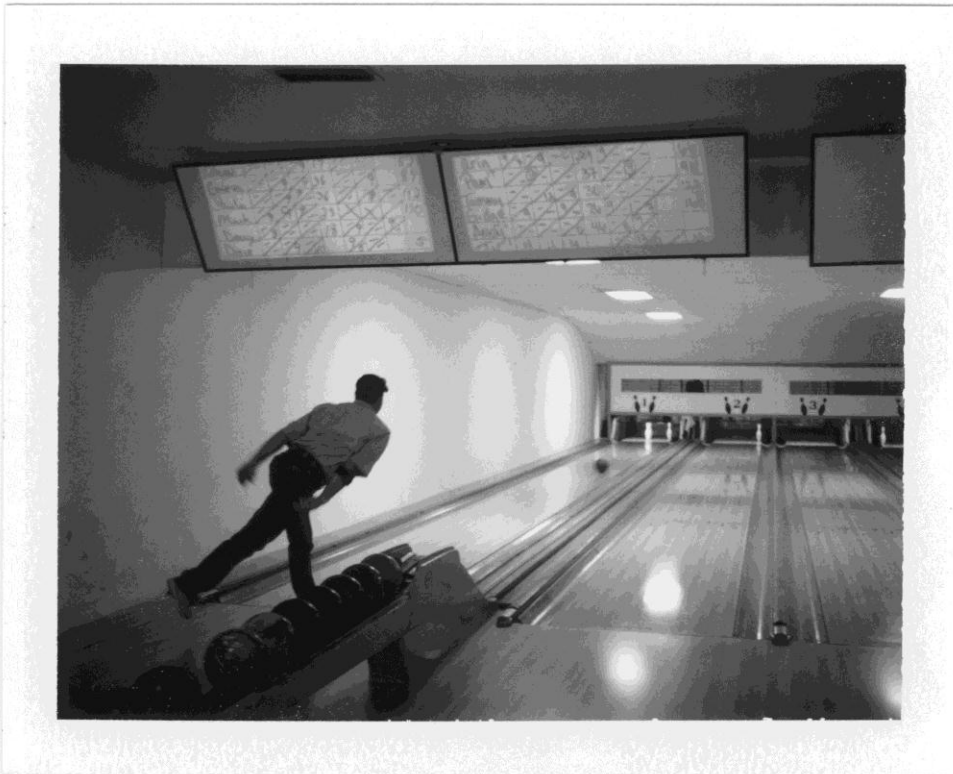


Illustration 31: Bowler

“I think it has a really good chance, I’m a little more excited about it now than I was the last time I was talking to you, things are happening,” he said. Gourley is happy to see the number of teams rising, even if only slightly from the last few years. Eighteen teams is a good sign, but more important to him was that a few of them were primarily younger players.

Ramsey, who is by far one of the younger players in Blanco, sees a bright future for ninepin, in Blanco and all over the Tri-County area. She emphatically said, “A lot of

these small towns are hesitant to change, them getting a website and social network is going to be a hard position to get over... nobody wants anything to change here. It's going to take younger people coming in here that want change to make it happen.”



Illustration 32: Colton Maly #2

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Vita

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This report was typed by Spencer Selvidge.